(ii) Introduction of Time-Related Continuity Allowance (TRCA) on the pattern of first two scales of pay recommended by the Justice Talwar Committee for each category of ED Agents (except ED SPMs for which only one TRCA).

(iii) Provision of paid leave for 10 days for each half year, without the facility of carry forward.

(iv) Increased limit of ex-gratia gratuity for ED Agents from Rs. 6000/- to Rs. 18,000/-.

(v) Increased amount of Office maintenance Allowance from Rs. 25/- per month to Rs.50/- per month for EDBPMs. and EDSPMs.

(vi) Payment of lumpsum Severance Amount of Rs. 20,000/- or Rs. 30,000/- depending on period of employment of ED Agents, on demitting office at the age of 65 years or after absorption against regular departmental post. as a form of post employment benefits.

Recommendations made by justice Talwar Committee also including those for rationalising the ED system, reducing the number of ED Agents and also capping future growth of the system. But appreciating the relevance of the ED System for the rural postal network and its social benefits, Government have not implemented these recommendations. The Government's policy therefore, ensures full justice to the interest of ED Agents. The benefits extended to the EDAs through order dated 17-12-98 were then estimated to involve recurring additional annual expenditure of Rs. 301.35 crores, over and above an amount of Rs. 157.74 crores on account of payment of arrears for the period of 1-1-96 to 28-2-98.

Improving the terms and conditions of engagement of Extra Departmental Agents including the prospects of eligible ED Agents for absorption against regular vacancies is a continuing exercise. Existing rules of recruitment for the cadres of Postman, Postal Assistant/Sorting Assistant and Grade "D" already provide for preference to eligible ED Agents for recruitment against departmental post.

Tele-density target

3839. SHRI PREM CHAND GUPTA : Will the Minister of COMMUNICATIONS be pleased to state :

(a) whether it is a fact that Government has set 7 per cent tele-density target by the year 2005 ;

(b) whether the present tele-density is only 2.4 per cent ; and

(c) if so, what are Government's plans to achieve their target ?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS (SHRI TAPAN SIKDAR) : (a) and (c) The New Telecom Policy 1999 envisage teledensity of 7 % by the year 2005. In order to achieve this target it would be necessary to provide 754 lakhs DELs including Mobile telephone by the year 2005 to achieve this target of teledensity. The present status of number of telepohone including mobile phones is 284.32 lakhs which implies an addition of 469.68 lakhs telephones during 2000 to 2005. The contribution from Private Sector in mobile as well as fixed telephone connections is also envisaged in the New Telecom Policy 1999. The telephone density for fixed telephones as on 31-3-2000 is 2.67 per 100 persons and the teledensity including mobile phones as on 31-3-2000 is 2.85 per 100 persons. Government proposes to increase the Annual Plan targets for providing new telephone connections every year, depending on demand.

Slashing of long distance call charges

3840. SHRI PREM CHAND GUPTA : Will the MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS be pleased to state :

(a) whether it is a fact that the Telecom Commission policy making and planning body for the telecom sector including DoT and DTS favours slashing of long distance charges to bring them in line with the rates prevailing abroad ; and

(b) if so, what is the progress made in this regard ?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS (SHRI TAPAN SIKDAR) : (a) and (b) As per section 11(2) of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India Act, 1997, fixation of tariff for various telecom services is the responsibility of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) an independent regulator. The TRAI issued a Tarrif Order 1999 on March 9, 1999 reducing *inter-alia* domestic long distance rates by about 20% which the Department of Telecom Services, as a service provider, has implemented with effect from 01-05-1999.